



## Troublesome learning journey

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## **Chapter 3: Vanessa Cottle**

### **Troublesome Learning Journey**

#### **Introduction**

Students new to masterly learning (referred to as level 7 by Ofqual 2014) in education derive from a range of contexts and perspectives. Examples of these contexts and perspectives include: their current professional context; professional standing and maturity; academic discipline and prowess as well as their personal characteristics and motivations. According to Morris and Wisker (2010) this heterogeneity leads to implications for student wellbeing and, therefore, achievement. Whilst Morris and Wisker (2010) recognise that the process of learning naturally, even necessarily, brings with it troublesome experiences they feel that it is important for students to be supported by their Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to deal with these experiences. Their research (2010: 4-5) identifies 'a sense of community belonging'; a 'culture which nurture[s] confidence'; 'successful supervisory relationships' and equitability for these diverse students as elements in preparing them for dealing with the challenging experiences of postgraduate study.

Other recent research (Wellington 2010; Simon and Turner 2012; Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013) concurs with Morris and Wisker (2011) in suggesting that HEIs should help students in developing the skills required to overcome those unforeseen barriers to attainment and progression. However, I contend that students do need to be proactive in: recognising their own limitations and difficulties; identifying what provision is available and in discussing their needs with appropriate persons where support is not available.

#### **The Journey Begins**

Whatever the motivations for starting a postgraduate learning journey, for most there will be an expectation that, as Hulse and Hulme (2012) found, opportunities for learning and engaging in critical explorations of practice will be encountered. The degree to which individuals embrace and engage with these opportunities will vary and be dependent on personal motivations, life priorities and circumstances. Additionally, each participant brings their own personal profile of skills, qualities and

experience which will have implications for their experience of postgraduate study. Furthermore, individuals have preconceived ideas that influence their approach to study; for example practitioners with a healthy record of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training events may believe that study at masterly level will be a similar experience in furthering their professional status. However, CPD training events and education at masters level offer different types of learning and, whilst both are valuable to a lesser or greater degree, Turner and Simon (2012) draw on Aubusson et al (2009) to make a distinction between teacher learning and professional learning. They explain that teacher learning concerns training teachers about their role in practice and that professional learning concerns teachers developing the degree of autonomy which enables them to take responsibility for their own decisions.

The above array of elements is integral to an individual's personal and professional lifelong learning journey and suggests that the knowledge anticipated as an outcome from study will be highly situational, that is particular to the context in which it grows and is used. Capable learners sustain their journey by commanding a range of academic literacies to enable reinterpretation of new ideas and concepts (yet not the misinterpretation of them) in the light of understandings developed in their professional context. Negotiating the journey towards proficient scholarship requires a willingness and an openness to embark on a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of practice by employing innovative and creative approaches and applying, sometimes unfamiliar, theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This synthesis of theory and practice is usually militated by tacit knowledge emerging from previous internalisations and embedded understandings of practice thus the importance of the situational context.

### **Engaging in Study**

The reconsiderations and new meaning makings of knowledge, understanding and, often practice, mentioned above can only be achieved by engagement in study and commitment to practice together with the type of autonomy and independence that comes with confidence in one's own decisions and actions. However, overwhelmingly, literature which researches and considers postgraduate study (for example: Lahiff 2005; Wellington 2010; Dickson 2011; Hulse and Hume 2012; Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013) identifies confidence as a particular concern for students. This issue can be

seen from two perspectives. One perspective highlights students' claims that, as a result of completing postgraduate studies, their confidence levels increase. However, the literature offers no indication by how much nor at what level of confidence students started their journey – the distance travelled is very much for the individual student to measure and this reflects the personal development gains to be achieved during postgraduate study. The other perspective reflects students' concerns about their inadequate levels of academic competency and some literature, for example Conway (2011) and Butler (2009) certainly suggest that there is a percentage (again not quantified) of students for whom these self-doubts are well placed. Lea and Street's (1998) work is drawn on by Hallett (2010) and Strauss and Mooney (2011), to identify different dimensions of postgraduate students academic competency needs. These were, firstly, skills such as grammar and spelling, developing appropriate search terms to source relevant reading sources and structuring writing for different purposes. Secondly, academic socialisation which implies forging relationships to become part of the academy. Then, thirdly, academic literacies were identified, for example, how to reference; ethical expectations; using evidence to support arguments and how to be critical. It is the second of these dimensions that can cause the most difficulty when each HEI, and indeed programme within the institution, brings to bear its own cultural expectations. The institutional culture can potentially have a negative effect on confidence levels by exacerbating the students' difficulty in grasping what is required.

Personally, I have always assumed that postgraduate students would have a competent command of academic literacies and I believe this assumption is shared by my colleagues and others outside higher education. Indeed Strauss and Mooney (2011:541) champion a good command of English as 'essential' for postgraduate study, yet Hallett (2010) has identified that masters students have difficulty with basics like spelling, grammar and referencing. This gives rise to a concern about achieving a balance between, what I think of as, process over content. An overemphasis on process has the potential to detract the student from, what is likely to be at the heart of the desire to learn, the content; i.e. the knowledge to be gained from study which will inform and improve practice. However, Strauss and Mooney (2011) consider that without the ability to write well, achievement cannot be demonstrated. My experience supports the notion that for masterly study academic literacies are essential – it is inconceivable to me that a practitioner in any form of education might not be able to

construct a sentence, paragraph or argument using sound English underpinned with appropriate and authoritative sources. To me, without this foundation subject matter cannot be grasped through reading nor can it be articulated through writing with any degree of confidence (which as we have seen above is the subject of much discussion in the literature) and, therefore, cannot be transformed into the new meanings which students aim to gain from their study.

### **Learning to Read**

McCulloch (2013:145) gave some insights into what it is to develop your reading skills for the purpose of writing. Her study of students who thought aloud as they read, revealed strategies which included: 'drawing inferences'; 'checking authors' credentials' and the 'drawing of comparisons across multiple sources'. The better the command of and use of English the more efficiently students would be able to access reading sources that go to the heart of their writing needs; it would also aid in understanding author perspectives and help penetrate seemingly impenetrable theories. Accessing, reading and understanding sources, however, can be overwhelming and confidence is required to reject those sources unsuitable for purpose. According to McCulloch (2013:142), having sufficient confidence to '... view sources as holding potentially conflicting positions ...' rather than '... see them as the accepted authority.' is another essential in the repertoire of literacies.

This ability to recognise authority in academic writing, or lack of it, is identified by Turner and Simon (2012) as taking a critical stance. They suggest developing a critical stance with the literature enables a deconstruction of one's beliefs and values, for example one research participant in their work reported experiencing a 'significant shift' in her practice from a focus on teaching to a focus on teacher and pupil learning. This participant's developing autonomy based on growing understanding of the concepts behind her own actions gave her the confidence and ability to successfully defend her new innovative teaching and learning strategies with Ofsted inspectors. This suggests that students need to face their postgraduate studies with an openness to meet challenges which might demand a change of mind, even heart, knowing that this may have implications for their core values and beliefs.

### **Facing the Blank Page**

As reading is transformed into writing students are expected to engage in an exhausting list of activity to enable them to defend or refute confidently their current and future practice. For example they should be able to: justify the relevance of their sources; offer a consideration of the author's and their own positionality and offer an interrogation of the author's research design. Wellington (2010) suggests that time has elastic properties; his research participants found that writing seemed to slow their thinking down and this probably helps to explain why the business of writing can draw out ideas and tacit knowledge. It is clear then, to me, that it is through the process of writing that students demonstrate, not only their knowledge and understanding, but their level of critical analysis and evaluation.

### **And after the Reading and Writing**

There is a further point to developing masterly reading and writing skills and that is the submission of assignments or the sitting of examinations. Work submitted is usually returned to students having been assessed in accordance with the HEI's marking guidance and with feedback from an academic with expertise in the field. The process of credible feedback and feed forward is a fundamental part of any learning. Studies in postgraduate contexts (Kumar and Stucke 2011; Boud and Molloy 2013 and Dijksterhuis, Schuwirth, Braat, Teunissen and Schule 2013) confirm that, whilst feedback is significant, to be fully effective feedback should be a two way activity in which students lead in its initiation. Feedback should be about sharing ideas, meanings and implications – about becoming a pedagogic discourse (O'Grady and Cottle 2014).

The process of receiving, engaging with and acting on feedback received involves the postgraduate student in a determination to reflect; a preparedness to revisit thinking and the confidence to challenge others' thinking. Hallett (2010) sees academic support as both addressing deficit and planning for development: feedback can be pivotal in achieving both. Feedback and feed forward is viewed as a professional pedagogic dialogue by O'Grady and Cottle (2014) and as such can be seen as part of the developing relationship between student and the academy and, therefore, goes some way to alleviate the feelings of isolation identified by Morris and Wisker (2010).

The theme of confidence discussed earlier in relation to feedback is explored by Strauss and Mooney (2011:541) when their participants demonstrated low confidence by frequently asking whether or not they are on the 'right track' rather than being able to make their own judgement. Certainly, students frequently appear at my tutorials unprepared to engage in discussion about their work, only to simply ask 'is my work ok?'. This approach suggests poor levels of independent thought and autonomy, both noted by QAA benchmarks as being characteristics of masterly achievement, and could suggest a desire on the student's part to adopt a tick box or hoop jumping approach to study. It is unclear whether this is due to pressures from other life priorities; a learned approach to study emanating from their own practices in teaching and learning or feelings of isolation resulting from poor academic literacy and consequent low confidence levels. Further research is required here and is a consideration of my doctoral thesis on Becoming an Education Masters Student. Over-supportive tutors who are more than willing to adopt the least line of resistance by taking too much responsibility for the student's work could also contribute to this dependency. Such an approach to supporting learning could exacerbate or even feed students' low confidence by increasing their dependency on the 'tutor-crutch', particularly at postgraduate level.

Where the above student-tutor dependency model develops, allowing students to scrape through their learning journey, there can be dramatic and irretrievable implications when, at the dissertation stage, there is finally an overt expectation on the part of the supervisor, and a realisation on the part of the student, that there is no alternative but for the student to demonstrate independence and for the tutor to withdraw. I am proposing here that whilst the student-tutor relationship might overcome student isolation, relationships, as with other aspects of study, have a purpose and should be cultivated to enhance independent learning not replace it.

Wellington's (2010) concern with student emotions led him to an alternative perspective on the feedback process. He suggests that students anticipate feedback with trepidation as a result of, amongst other things, the emotion invested during the process of writing. This may not be surprising when, from the student viewpoint, time and energy is committed to recording in print or verbally their thoughts, and sometimes feelings, for judgement which, the student may feel, takes no account of them as an

individual, may be disparaging and may not grasp the intended meaning and argument.

### **What did it really mean?**

The professional pedagogical dialogue (O'grady and Cottle 2014) mentioned earlier demands an element of self- reflection. A consideration of Gibbs (1988) model of reflection reveals that seeking comment from others is part of this process. Therefore, reflection, whilst ultimately a personal experience, does not need to be a lonely part of the learning journey and may diminish feelings of isolation. Wellington (2010) perceives reflections as confessions which are an essential and positive part of reflexivity and a feature of the criticality required (QAA 2010) of postgraduate students. Such reflexivity is about facing oneself, one's actions and motives, a process which may be neither easy nor pleasant. Going further, I argue that reflexivity is about taking action on what has been learned and about making sense of experiences. According to Gadsby and Cronin (2012:2), for the purpose of their discussion on reflective journaling as a mechanism to support masters' level writing skills, reflexivity is achieved through

... a consideration of, and possible change in, [students'] own personal skills, knowledge and disposition in light of personal, professional and wider social contexts in which [students] as practitioners operate.

It is clear that progressing through the postgraduate learning journey successfully requires sufficient confidence in one's own independence of thought and autonomy to be able to take account of new learning in context and by planning and taking appropriate action.

### **Nearly There**

The part of being reflective that is about talking and sharing with others is also the first step on the journey to becoming part of a masterly community. Wenger (1998:7) explains that communities of practice arise when groups of individuals 'count on each other to cope with intricacies of obscure systems'. Such a core community includes those who have become expert, with those more novice individuals on the periphery moving to the core as they learn through talking, sharing, questioning and contributing. Study with others certainly gives rise to dialogue through argument and discussion



and Reeves (2011:964) sees this ‘... extracting and carrying ...’ as leading to the mobilisation of knowledge and that by

... making distinctions in practice and recombining the knowledge of one person, or of a group, with the knowledge of others ...,

synthesis of theory and practice can occur. Discussion with others means that there is an imperative to ‘... think through and articulate ... thoughts ... it forces you to examine the strength of your argument’ Hallett (2010:232). Hallett’s (2010) and Reeves’ (2011) comments mirror Wenger’s (1998) concept of community of practice and strongly suggest that learning and application of new concepts is neither linear nor straightforward. I have observed the very gradual process that students, particularly those who study part time, are absorbed into the culture of their programme and consequently cast off feelings of isolation as they grow in confidence.

### **Consequences of daring to learn**

It can be confusing for an otherwise successful individual to realise that they have a gap in their academic literacy repertoire. Wisker and Morris (2010) found that this could lead to feelings of being deskilled and create conditions which are challenging to well established professional identities. An example might be a successful school teacher, although expert in a subject discipline, say geography, who struggles with academic literacies appropriate for studying Education at masterly level and is exacerbated by a tutor who comes from yet a different discipline. Understanding how the variety of identities and contexts of those involved in the learning journey, i.e. tutors, students and institutions, dynamically interact is seen by Hallett (2010) as being a central factor in facilitating academic literacy development. I would urge students embarking on this journey to be alert to this and suggest that their insights and reflections on their own and others’ positions will be helpful in spotting and addressing barriers to their academic development.

Illeris (2014), who draws from a range of other authors’ definitions, claims that learning is about change and transformation resulting from experiencing and assimilating new ideas and concepts. The outcome of masterly education can, therefore, be transformational and for Illeris (2013) identity is what is transformed in the learning process. Wilson and Deane (2010) ascertain that tensions arise as one’s identities compete with each other according to the different contexts in which they are played

out. It can then be seen how the mindset for masterly learning needs to bridge the divide between teacher learning and professional learning discussed earlier in this chapter. Professional identity for many who work within educational contexts is developed within a culture that often 'requires a high degree of unquestioning conformity' (Gleeson and Husbands 2001:314 cited by Hulse and Hulme 2012) in order to meet the demands of accountability. This culture of performativity tends to drive the technicism that becomes central in a practitioner's life challenging the risk taking that will, almost certainly, be the tempting outcome for those who do embrace the opportunities to engage in the deconstruction of current practice as they absorb new concepts and ideas. This challenging journey and the offer of transformation may feel somewhat intimidating for some who may choose to resist the consequences by retreating into the comparative safety of liminality (Land 2014) and remain on the threshold of transformation and new identity. Postgraduate learning may offer an opportunity for students to risk stepping through this threshold by embracing their own growing independence and their developing identity as a postgraduate who has authority to engage in critical debate and make new meanings.

### **The final leg?**

Resistance to transformation is reflected in a recent discussion I had with some students. I was particularly struck by the fact that they struggled to see the relevance of a core module of their MA Education programme. The module, on research methodology, is essential to the Independent Study – the final piece of work in which a year of time is invested and outcomes are usually significant in terms of effect on individuals' practice and even career; certainly without passing this module they will not achieve the qualification. To me, the apparent reticence of this small group of students suggested that they had not fully embraced the mantle of postgraduate level study, that is they were rejecting or resisting a developing academic identity and had chosen to remain in a state of liminality on the threshold of transformation. To some extent this is understandable where the practitioner or professional identity foregrounds that of the postgraduate student. However, I wonder to what extent an individual will derive benefit from such study if they resist developing knowledge and understanding of research methodology. It is, after all, this that underpins the competence required for development of new knowledge which must be critiqued to be applied in practice and is a stated characteristic required for accreditation of a

master's qualification (QAA 2010, 2011). Furthermore, a grasp of research methodology is indispensable in making judgements about the ethicality, validity and reliability of increasingly available sources used to substantiate claims.

Postgraduate students are often involved in informal research in action as they reflect on, evaluate and adjust their own practice. Postgraduate students quickly become aware that the term *research* suggests all manner of mysteries in the guise epistemology, ontology and paradigms and are exposed to a wider range of research approaches and data collection tools than undergraduates. As an educationalist, the methodologies employed can present a further trouble to contend with as the qualitative approaches often adopted may seem alien when compared to those quantitative paradigms adopted during undergraduate years. Indeed, educational decision makers often expect quantitative research, rather than qualitative, to justify why funding should be committed to proposed projects and this can seem counter-intuitive for many educationalists. Then there are the implications and consequences of being an insider researcher where the demands on the researcher to remain objective and unbiased may be testing. An employing organisation's values and agendas could create further tensions for a researcher. For example, an organisation which funds, or simply gives consent for, research could exert power to influence how research findings are interpreted. Drake and Heath's claim (2011:23) that practitioner research cannot be '... clean, neutral or objective.' and that it carries ethical challenges for which the student has to take responsibility demands a research design that is exhaustively considered and systematically executed by the postgraduate student at the culmination of their learning journey.

This final leg of the journey then is no less troublesome than the earlier stages; in spite of all the hurdles overcome the challenges of learning continue. If the learning journey progresses successfully, questions raised within the process of meaning making are deeper and they demand more attention to get closer to an answer.

## **Arrival**

Underlying much of the research, and my own experience of working with masters students, is a sense that postgraduate students lack preparedness for the journey to come and, in some cases, they have unrealistic expectations of themselves and the

HEI at which they study. The requirements of postgraduate courses in terms of time, energy and implications for emotional wellbeing and professional identity can come as a shock. Whilst all institutions aim to support their learners through their troubles the required postgraduate competencies of independence and autonomy demand that students also support themselves. It is, however, also very clear that by recognising and addressing the pitfalls to be faced during this potentially troublesome journey the outcome can be rewarding and transformational for students as their confidence rises, their academic relationships are shaped and their practice emerges in creative and innovative ways. The reader is invited to reflect on whether the risks and demands are worth the reward.

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